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ABSTRACT

Three reports present identification and analysis findings on a business language program offered at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University for the learning of French, German, and Japanese, sponsored by the Department of English. The goal was to teach students the languages so that they may function in foreign company representative offices in Hong Kong. This report offers findings from three summer staff persons on the need for the language training, based on local surveys and actual overseas experience. One staff member reports on work in a French hypermarket chain in France. A second staff member discusses a survey conducted with German companies located in Hong Kong to discover German communication skills needed in Hong Kong; a report of a summer internship in a German mailorder company in Germany is also given. The third report is on the experience in five workplaces in Japan. In conclusion, the need for such a business and language program in Hong Kong is confirmed, and five areas are cited as being most important for review and investigation in order to help students succeed in attaining the working level in their third language that is expected in the workplace. (NAV)

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Language and the World of Work

Goodwin

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LANGUAGE AND THE WORLD OF WORK

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INTRODUCTION (by June Goodwin - Course Leader)

In September 1993 we started a new degree course in the Department of English at the then Hong Kong Polytechnic -***BA Languages with Business.(BALB)*** In addition to continuing their study of Chinese (including Putonghua) and English to a higher level in a business context, students have the opportunity to start learning a new language as a **major** subject and to spend a period of time abroad during the course of their studies. They can choose between French, German and Japanese.

We envisage that many of our graduates will find employment in the French, German or Japanese business communities in Hong Kong - there are approximately 350 French, over 450 German and 900 Japanese companies established here. We have built up a good working relationship with various companies and the relevant Chambers of Commerce over the years whilst we were running the Higher Diploma in Trilingual Secretarial Studies.

One of the main aims of the course is to ensure that there is as much integration as possible between the language areas and the business areas . Here I am using the term business in its widest connotation, since the Departments of Business Studies, Management, Computing, and Accountancy all contribute, in differing amounts, to the course. Business Studies and Management contribute the lion's share. In order to facilitate this integration between different disciplines there is a specific element built into each year of the course which is organised and run by the three Departments of English, Management and Business Studies in close cooperation: Contemporary Societies in Year 1, the Forum on Languages, Business & Culture in Year 2 and the International Colloquium in Year 3.

In order to further promote the integration of languages with business, this summer staff from each of the three foreign language areas undertook a period of attachment to companies in France, Germany and Japan respectively. Part of the aim was to observe business situations and procedures in order to gain more insight into the workings of a company in that country, since working experience in business is not necessarily a part of a language teacher's experience in life. However, apart from familiarising ourselves with the life of a business on an everyday basis, we also had aims which were more pedagogic: namely to identify those areas in which there might be common communication situations and strategies applicable to all three languages and to identify those which were quite unique to a particular language and/or culture.

Having identified these strategies and situations we would be better equipped to develop or adapt teaching materials appropriate for the teaching of business French, Japanese and German in cooperation with our colleagues teaching Chinese and English for business,

and with other colleagues teaching in the business areas. So far we are at the first stage: identification and analysis.

WORK EXPERIENCE IN FRANCE

My work experience in France was in Brittany with a very large hypermarket chain, the Leclerc group which covers the whole of the territory of France. I was placed in various different sections and situations so that I could get an overview of how the operation works at different organisational levels. Thus I was able to observe and discuss with many different people in positions of responsibility, the organisation, structure and day to day running of three major operations: a large hypermarket, the cooperative wholesale buying operation and the sourcing and import operation at the headquarters in Paris and at the entrepot in Le Havre.

It was a very worthwhile experience at different levels: on a personal level it was an extremely interesting and educational experience. I learned a lot. At the level of observation of interaction of people and the management structure, it was unusual because it is a company where the basic philosophy underscores everything that is done and the way that it is done: to buy and sell as cheaply as possible quality goods and produce. At the linguistic and socio-linguistic levels it was even more interesting. During their stay abroad at the end of their second year our French students will spend some time working in a foreign company. To work in a French company, appropriate language competence is essential since it is not very common to find anyone who speaks English or who wishes to speak anything but French.

What kind of language strategies would best prepare students for this experience? Most important is the ability to explain, convince and defend and to be able to justify views and decisions. Verbal self-defence is a *sine qua non* in the business world in France, mainly because of the characteristic French way of conducting meetings, discussions and negotiations. Waiting and turn-taking as practised by the British is not so common and the approach is generally much more assertive, sometimes even aggressive. However this does not negate a knowledge of strategies of politeness, which are also important. These kinds of communication and survival strategies are also transferrable to everyday life situations outside of business in France because the same kind of approach prevails there too.

Questioning arguments, assumptions and conclusions is another kind of strategy which it is useful in a French business situation. Of course this also entails the development of a questioning attitude amongst our students, something which is rather alien to the Chinese culture where direct confrontation is something to be avoided. One of the difficulties in integrating this kind of strategy into the language teaching environment in year two before the students go abroad, is that they are rather high-level strategies, whereas the students, having started the language, albeit quite intensively (eight hours per week), in year one, do not yet have a very sophisticated command of the language. However, although they have learned the L3 for only two years at this juncture, they are experienced language learners in terms of English and their native language , and are relatively mature young people aged about twenty or twenty-one. Moreover it is an integral part of our teaching of French to encourage a questioning attitude right from the beginning, so that these

strategies can be used in a simple way, with greater sophistication of language developing on the job whilst abroad and on their return.

German for Business in Hong Kong (by Ursula Wingate)

In relation to the German language element of the BALB course a special survey was conducted in German companies in Hong Kong. Some results of this survey are presented here and their implication on our language teaching in the BALB course examined.

One aim of our questionnaire[1], to which 126 companies responded, was to find out what skills are required from German speaking personnel. The following table shows how German is mainly used in companies in Hong Kong:

direct personal communication	**75%**
telephone communication	**68%**
business correspondence	**51%**
information gathering from German sources	**35%**
business entertainment	**35%**
sales/negotiations	**29%**

These figures clearly indicate that the emphasis of our programme has to be on communicative/oral skills.
Another clear result from the survey was that the knowledge of German is an asset for local personnel, only if they have a high level of proficiency.
At the moment much of the business that has to be conducted in German is still done by expatriates, as local staff with sufficient competence in German cannot easily be found.

In interviews with five MDs of different companies we found out that there is a key area, for which Chinese staff with a very good command of German are required: The liaison (middleman) role in German-Chinese trade proceedings. This is an area for which we can provide integrated training in languages and business.

Fifty one percent of the companies surveyed are trading companies, several of them buying offices. Because of Hong Kongs's business structure (production takes place in China, but trade in Hong Hong) local staff are needed to bridge the communication gap. To a certain extent this gap can be bridged with English, but often only with great difficulty. In buying offices the middleman is the merchandiser, who liaises between the Chinese manufacturer and the German buyer. The merchandiser is involved in all parts of the trading process, starting from sourcing, checking samples and ordering[2]. He checks during production and pushes the supplier for delivery punctuality, and often coordinates quality control and shipment. Merchandisers at the same time deal with the buyer in Germany on a daily basis. Often the buyer's English is limited (he is an expert in textiles or electronics, but not a good

linguist), and often there are unforeseen problems in the trade proceedings, which make communication in English between merchandiser and buyer even more difficult. Therefore it would be a great advantage if the merchandiser had a high level of competence in German.

The importance of a "middleman" does of course not only apply to the export business, but as we found out from interwievs, also to import and the service industry. The middleman's main asset would be to reduce the number of languages involved in the spoken parts of the trade procedure from three to two, thus avoiding English, which is a foreign language to all people involved. English, however, does by no means become redundant, as most of the written documents are in English, for instance the documentation of Trade Finance (Letter of Credit), of Quality Control (quality control forms) and Shipment (Bill of Lading, Certificate of Origin,etc.).

In summer 1994 I spent two weeks in the Import Department and the Buying Department of OTTO Versand, Germany's biggest mail order business. My aim was to find out how these departments deal with the overseas buying offices. In order to improve efficiency and delivery time, OTTO Versand had just recently introduced **Mirror Teams** with the following structure:

MIRROR TEAMS

Hamburg		**Hong Kong**
Buyer		**Merchandiser**
Assistant Buyer		**Assistant Merchandizer**
Quality Developer		**Quality Technician**

The German team is headed by the buyer who determines the demands from the German market. The merchandiser, head of the team in Hong Kong, finds and supervises the supplier for these demands.
These teams work together on a small product area, for instance sporting accessories. The buyer travels to Hong Kong at least twice a year, the merchandiser travels to Hamburg once a year for seminars and meetings. Buyers and merchandisers deal with each other every day, mainly in spoken language.
As proved by statements of several buyers in OTTO-Versand, German language skills would be a most desirable asset for their counterparts in Hong Kong and would improve cooperation and business climate considerably.

The role of a merchandiser is one area for a business simulation involving German, English and Chinese, as well as Business. The business aspect would be to make the students familiar with the whole set of trade proceedings for a certain product, from sourcing to shipping. Students then learn how to communicate and negotiate in the different business situations occuring during trade proceedings.

Professional knowledge and Japanese language proficiency required for non-Japanese staff in Japanese firms (by Yuko Miyazoe Wong)

In September 1994 I undertook a two-week work experience in firms in Japan. First of all, I must mention that the five firms I stayed in had never had any trainee like me from overseas tertiary institutions. What I did during the period was mostly 'participant observation' and information-gathering rather than actual work. Though the period was short, I gained first-hand information on how people worked and communicated in workplace settings. My activities were roughly divided into the following four types:

1) observing everyday operation and communication among staff members in workplace settings,
2) collecting written materials and information related to the business operation,
3) investigating and identifying the levels of Japanese language and professional knowledge required and expected for non-Japanese staff in Japanese firms. (The information was collected through interviewing non-Japanese staff, their superiors and/or personnel managers and their Japanese co-workers,) and
4) helping with their work, such as writing letters, word-processing, and proofreading of written materials.

The five workplace settings I observed were: a trading house, a publishing company, a jewellery retail company, a research institute attached to an investment firm, and a management consultancy company. The number of employees varied from 20,000 to 5. The total number of non-Japanese staff I interviewed was 31, and they were from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Korea, the Philippines, Australia, U.S.A., and Israel. Their jobs were related to marketing, sales, management, consultancy, research and translation. All of them had obtained Bachelor Degrees and one-third of them had higher qualifications, such as Master degrees, MBA and Ph.D. Their major fields ranged from Linguistics, Japanese Literature, Economics, Electrical Engineering to Computer Science. As for their Japanese Language proficiency, all of them could be categorized as Advanced to Superior users of the Japanese language in the ACTFL proficiency guidelines.
(The ACTFL proficiency guidelines specify five levels in terms of proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior, and Distinguished.)
The range of their everyday assignments in terms of Japanese language use was almost as wide and demanding as that of their Japanese co-workers, namely:

1) communication skills (speaking, listening and interacting with the Japanese)
   discussing and planning with Japanese co-workers, meeting clients, presentation of their products and proposals.
2) interpersonal skills
   meeting with clients, talking during business lunches and social functions.
3) reading skills
   reading Japanese reports and newspapers to gather information,
   reading Japanese letters, fax, and memos.

4) writing skills

writing internal memos and inter-branch memos and fax in Japanese.
(formal Japanese letters are usually written by Japanese co-workers)

5) sociocultural understanding ('Japan literacy, ' a broader term according to Neustupny)

All of them evaluated their Japanese linguistic skills (skills (1)-(4) above) as being more or less satisfactory to carry out their assignments, but they admitted that they should continue developing them. They unanimously voiced their views that novice or intermediate level of Japanese linguistic competence was "useless" in workplace settings. Since the activities in the workplace are highly task-oriented with a rigid time frame, a mediocre level of Japanese proficiency may actually lead to misunderstanding and confusion. Most of them mentioned that their Japanese sociolinguistic and sociocultural competence should be developed further to work more smoothly and successfully with a Japanese. The sociolinguistic competence that most of them found difficult was related to the usage of honorifics, backchannelling, choice of topics, and pragmatic competence (to appropriately express apology and reaction to compliments in Japanese).

These views were supported by their Japanese superiors and co-workers who were constantly interacting with them. From the personnel management's point of view, non-Japanese staff members are highly evaluated only when their professional knowledge is excellent and vital to the development and operation of the company. In other words, they will not view non-Japanese staff's Japanese language proficiency as an asset unless it is of an Advanced or Superior level, so as to facilitate their communication and the business operation of their firms.

These views were almost identical with the results of a questionnaire sent to 100 personnel managers of Japanese firms in Hong Kong in 1992.
(The number of Japanese firms registered in Hong Kong in 1994 is more than 900.)
They preferred recruiting Hong Kong Chinese graduates who were Chinese-English bilinguals with a solid business knowledge in at least one discipline, rather than those who had no business training and a mediocre proficiency in English and Japanese.

It is very clear that the demand for Japanese-speaking business personnel (trilingual local business personnel) in Hong Kong is great and is still growing. The urgent issue we must tackle now is how our students can attain the expected Advanced/Superior level of Japanese language competence by the time they graduate.

In conclusion, we feel that the following are the most important areas for us to review and investigate, in order to help our students to succeed in attaining the working level in their third language which is expected in the workplace:

1. -design a comprehensive curriculum and syllabus to integrate business components and language components as fully as possible
2. -the curriculum and syllabus of Years 1, 2 & 3, and the programme of three month period abroad should all be systematically integrated so as to accelerate students' learning.
3. -the development and progress of students during the period abroad should be monitored.
4. -conduct longitudinal research on the process of students' acquisition of the target language.

5. -develop students' awareness and understanding of the target culture and their linguistic, sociolinguistic, and sociocultural competence in the target language.

1. The survey was conducted in cooperation with H.W.Hess from Hong Kong Baptist University.

2. The role of a merchandiser is thoroughly explained in: Cremer, Rolf D.; Mary J. Willes: Stock in trade: The Role of English in International Trade Proceedings. In: Florian Coulmas (ed.): The Economics of Language in the Asian Pacific (Journal of Asian Pacific Communication, Vol. 2:1, 1991), 103 - 116